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ABSTRACT

Students can be introduced to reader-writer relationships with the print world they recognize as most friendly, magazines. Comments concerning the wide range of magazines and the specificity of an individual magazine's audience should arise naturally. Teachers might ask their students to discover what textual features led to their definitions of reader. After the excitement of the magazine unit, students can be asked to complete a "definition of a reader" form for themselves as readers. Students should also be encouraged to question why they like certain publications and not others, as well as what they would have to do to become more like the intended readers of certain texts. If texts from different historical periods or cultural backgrounds are to be studied, a perfect opportunity arises for discussing how writers have changed their readers' world views and literary experiences over time and place. To help students realize reader-writer interactions, the teacher can play an important role by (1) continuing to let students respond; (2) encouraging them to define intended readers, to search for discrepancies between those readers and themselves, and to adjust in order to deal with new texts; and (3) allowing students to discover what it is about these texts that caused their responses and definitions. (A form for defining the intended audience is included.) (HOD)

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Defining the Reader's Role: An Approach to Teaching Literature

Sally A. Hudson

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Defining the Reader's Role: An Approach to Teaching Literature
Paper presented at the Spring Conference of
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Columbus, Ohio
April, 1984

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> Sir, as you and I are in a manner perfect strangers to each other, it would not have been proper to have let you into too many circumstances relating to myself all at once.... As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship....
>
> from Tristram Shandy

The reading-writing connection is nothing new. Perhaps the reader and the writer have simply lost touch in the twentieth century's concern with the text alone. However, writers and readers before and since Laurence Sterne have been aware of a special relationship which develops between writer and reader as the reader experiences a text and as the writer produces one. In 1760, Sterne's Mr. Shandy summarized it well as a "friendship" from which we hate to part--if both friends contribute to the effort. Similarly, modern critical theorists recognize both the act of reading as well as the act of writing as productive, not merely receptive. "The poem", as Rosenblatt calls the interaction of writer and reader at the point of the text, evolves as any social interaction does--with contributions from both parties.

Experienced readers are also aware that no two reading experiences, just like no two social encounters, are ever the same. In any particular time and setting, the reader brings to the text his or her own experiences and knowledge, interests and concerns, goals and values. At the same time, each text asks

something different of the reader. Through conventicns of genre, style, voice, and content, the writer's text pulls the reader not only from beginning to end, but also from outside to inside the world of the text, into the friendship potentially created by the interaction of reader, writer and text.

For the experienced reader, such generalizations are common, but generally unconscious, truisms. We smile at the memory of friends we have made in texts, and we marvel at the range of experiences print has allowed us. It is almost an elitist attitude. We know. We have enjoyed and stretched our minds and dreams. We long for the days when we can get back to doing more of it without interuptions. And for those who are a not "a part of the club", as Frank Smith (1983) calls it, we feel sorrow mixed with snobbery. If we are teachers of literature or reading, however, we must be willing to do more.

Too often young or immature readers view texts as enemies, not as potential friends. The very fact that the rules do change with each selection is confusing and frustrating. Too often our approach to reading texts is limited to allowing response or providing critical interpretations. In a response approach, students frequently remain stuck at the level of "personal statement" (Purves and Beach, 1972) or "engagement-involvement" (Purves, 1972). They are comfortable relating the text to themselves, interpreting it freely, reacting to content, even listening to and responding to the responses of others. Even in response-centered classroom, a common initial student response, especially to historically or culturally different pieces, is simply, "This is dumb." For works that are more in tune with students' language, interests, reading habits and experiences, we

might hope for a, "This is better. It's about time somebody spoke English!"

Students, however, do intuit how to deal with texts in the current milieu by simply being surrounded with print and interpretations of it. Many are unaware that they are voracious readers of ads, signs, brief articles, comics, or product information. Writers of these texts often have our students specifically in mind as their audiences. On the other had, literary and other texts that we ask students to deal with in school, and hope to encourage them to continue to enjoy in life, are often not aimed specifically at them. Although they are members of some groups, this is not one that comes naturally. Thus we must somehow help them bridge the gap into unknown territory.

In frustration with the response approach, teachers often retreat to lectures about "what the critics have said", definitions of literary terminology listed in the curriculum, or searches for the elusive main idea. However, I believe that we, as teachers, are not critics. The students know it and have put us in corners for years. When they do, we know it--in our heart of hearts. We know we have never read enough criticism to be experts. We know that anthologies and teachers' editions give us only the barest of critical bones--and then only those permissible for a national, public audience. We know that no human being could be an expert in the criticism or evaluation appropriate for thousands of years of literature or the range of informational texts in today's world.

Neither are we, however, counselors or entertainers, mimes or actors, film designers or great writers (with apologies

to the treasured few among us who may be one of the above). What we are, however, are members of an elite club--a club of those who love reading. And it is that talent, those rites of passage, that membership, which I think we can appropriately pass on to our students. We are "expert readers", the ones who understand how to communicate in the social interaction that is reading.

Any interaction between two people, especially when a friendship evolves, may be seen by others as elitist, as possessing a code of communication that the rest of us cannot decipher. Every social interaction has a set of conventions which facilitate communication. If one participant lacks a sense of these, communication is often stalled, rechanneled or completely stopped. Each of us has a range of social situations in which we can participate effectively. Those with the widest range are able to interact with the most diverse groups. Those with a limited range, limit their world views to the input of a few.

Our role as teachers of reading and literature, as members of an elite club of readers, should be to introduce our students to their hosts (the writers we have come to know and appreciate) and to help them come to understand the conventions of the group's interactions, the texts. In short, we should help them define their roles in the reading-writing relationship. We can demystify texts, the nature of the written word, and those who write. We can bring students into the club which we have enjoyed for years.

Walter Ong in his classic article which speaks so well to this point ("The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction", 1975) summarizes for us well: "Readers over the ages have had to learn this game of literacy, how to conform themselves to the projections of the writer's they read.... They have to know how

to play the game of being a member of an audience that 'really' does not exist. And they have to adjust when the rules change" (p. 12). Later he comments that "it takes time to get a feel for the roles that readers can be expected comfortably to play in the modern academic world" (p. 19).

Reader, Meet Writer: Some New Objectives

A change in teacher role from critic or cheerleader to "expert reader" also implies a change in goals for our students, or at least more specificity and depth. The following are five suggestions for a direction:

1. Students will discover new ways into new texts. They will learn to see and experience texts with the help of the writer with whom they are interacting.

2. Students will expand the range of reading in which they can participate comfortably on their own.

3. Students will be conscious first of their own responses to a text and then of how the author arouses certain response types through conventions of the text. They will see reasons in the text for their responses. (This objective summarizes the best of Purves et. al., it seems.)

4. Students will recognize authors who have altered our ways of seeing the world by changing the conventions of print. They will notice how the new conventions grew from the old. They will also relate such change to the other arts, the epistemology and philosophy, and the historical and culturnal milieu of the writer's time.

5. Students will better understand their personal likes and dislikes in literature as simply descriptive of current distances between certain writers and/or texts and themselves as readers. Such distances, they will realize, are constantly altered as we mature and change.

A Plan: A Method and Some Materials

To introduce students to reader-writer relationships, we can begin with the print world they recognize as most friendly, magazines. I would guess that all students have favorites that they can hardly wait to touch each month whether delivered at home

or to the drugstore shelves. Ask students to bring to class several magazines each, including ones their parents, brothers and sisters of any age, or friends read. Engage students in some general "show and tell" about their examples to build excitement and curiosity. Comments concerning the wide range of magazines and the specificity of individual magazine's audiences should arise naturally. Wouldn't it be easy to describe the "intended reader" for each one?

Introduce a questionnaire similar to "Definition of a Reader". (See Figure 1.) As a class, complete one of these on an overhead for a magazine common to all students (Scope, or another classroom publication, for example). The important goal is to put themselves in the role of and describe the reader that these publishers were aiming at. After everyone has the idea, ask pairs of students to define the readers for other magazines that were brought in. You might suggest that they complete a questionnaire for one magazine they always read and one which looks horrible to them!

Before moving on to oral sharing of magazines and audiences, ask students to look deeper. Ask them to study the magazines again to discover what aspects of the text led to their reader definitions. Textual features might include everything from pictures, to language style, to vocabulary, to type of print, to length of articles, etc.

Students might enjoy "selling" their magazines to the class in the form of testimonial advertisements from traditional readers (the old fuddy-duddy, rich gent with pipe and lap robe touting the joys of The New Yorker, etc.) Obviously these could be done in poster or oral (television or radio) form. Beyond getting the

concept of how texts define their readers, they also benefit from this activity as they learn about a range of publications they may never meet otherwise.

Students should also be asked to point out the important text features that led to their definitions. Basically, these technical, rhetorical, and ideational features are the tools the writer uses to "create his reader", as Henry James says. Guided by these features, readers may become the audiences that writers intended (or they may simply reject the text if they cannot handle them). List these features from the whole class with the reminder to keep looking deeper ("Ok, everyone can mention pictures and ads. What else?"). The comparison of magazines should bring about closer looks at such details. This class list can form the basis for something in the order of Figure 2 (designed for fiction of the type usually studied in schools) to be used later as a reference when students "define the readers" for literary texts.

After the excitement of the magazine unit, a bit of meditation may be appropriate. Ask students to complete a "definition of a reader" form for themselves as readers. Who are they? What do they like? How does this influence the reading they enjoy and dislike? Small group and class discussions, teacher conferences, a project to design a magazine specifically for yourself , etc. can be useful to further such thoughts.

Now students are prepared to tackle the tough part. Given their definitions of themselves as readers and the forms they completed on magazines, can they see <u>why</u> they like certain publications and not others? Where are the major differences? Most importantly of all: What would they have to do to <u>become</u> more like the intended readers of certain texts? What might they gain

from making such efforts? The goals of wide discussions, journal entries, jot lists, etc. here is to help students realize that 1) we are all individuals as readers, and 2) we can learn more about the world and others if we are willing to expand, to overlook, to make adjustments in order to "fit in" with others. Such conversations can easily lap over into common social situations: when have students had to adjust their behavior to get along with new groups? Why have they been glad that they did?

This concept can be furthered by sharing first verse or paragraph excerpts from a variety of texts with the students, a sort of "text-tasting" activity. The range might cover texts they will deal with during a course, a unit, or in independent reading choices. With "definition of reader" forms in hand, students might read a few excerpts and try to define the intended readers, just as they did with magazines. Again, ask them to determine which text features led to their conclusions (obviously pictures, etc. become less important now, and they must look for other features). Also, ask them to compare themselves as readers to the readers defined by these texts. Which texts might they especially like? Which might be more difficult? In order to read the difficult texts, what adjustments might they have to make? Can they make these? What might the values be if they did?

Gradually, this approach to reading new texts can become second nature which is, after all, the goal. Students, like all experienced and happy readers, should be able to identify texts as more or less interesting and worthwhile and to recognize compromises they may have to make to reap the benefits.

If texts from different historical periods or cultural backgrounds are to be studied, a perfect opportunity arises for

discussing how writers have changed their readers' world-views and literary experiences over time and place. For instance, Ong suggests that Hemingway forced modern readers of this century into a new intimacy, especially through his use of the definite pronoun. Faulkner, on the other hand, demonstrated the past living in the present in sentences long and involved enough to wrap thoughts of both in a single breath. Shakespeare's audience called for drama broad enough to entertain and enlighten; Vonnegut's enjoys slapstick destruction of chronology and logic (in much the same way as Tristram Shandy, by the way); and Beowulf's audience required the rhythmic chant of an expert story-teller of the clan. (For further excellent examples see both Ong, 1975, and Booth, 1961.)

A concentration on the audience defined by authors in their texts gives reason to many of the textual features, historical and cultural facts, and biographical tid-bits we have so often offered to deaf ears. Because Dickens' audience included common folk who received his chapters in installments, his novels are full of climaxes that keep those of us who have the full text wondering why we have all these ups and downs. Because Henry James wrote for the intellectual of Europe and America at the end of the Victorian period, his novels often seem dowdy, stuffy, and endlessly dull to those of us distanced from that time and place.

Much of this information is obvious in texts, however, without our lecturing upon it again. What student misses the climaxes in Dickens or the stuffiness of James? And might they not from serious thought and a bit of a search discover some possible (remember there are no answers) causes for these?

What we must do is 1) continue to let students respond, 2) encourage them to define intended readers, to search for discrepancies between those readers and themselves, to adjust (i.e. learn more, stay open-minded, overlook shocking content, etc.) in order to deal with new texts, and 3) allow them to discover what it is about these texts that caused their responses and definitions. As they want to know more, they will ask and search. As Frank Smith suggests, "If they are members of a club they want to live to its standards" (p. 567). They will want, in other words, to know more. However, "a child who does not want to learn is clearly demonstrating exclusion from the group, voluntary or imposed" (p. 567).

If we revert to forcing interpretations or facts on students, we are not helping them deal with reader-writer interactions. No one can simply carry more information into an situation and expect to use it; the need for the information must arise from one's own goals first. Students who are becoming readers will need more and more. That is when it is our role, as the experts, to offer it.

So our students do not become great critics. Neither are we. Neither are their parents, or ours, or the school board, or the community of people who passed through our schools. Among all of these, however, are a special few: those who choose to read all of their adult lives, those who are challenged by new texts, those who enrich their lives by seeing and experiencing life in new ways as a result of the texts they have known. If students gain an awareness of and respect for the writer/reader relationship and an appreciation for the differences in texts and ourselves, we have given them not only introductions--reader, meet writer--but also the keys to the front door of the club.

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April, 1984

CONVENTIONS OF TEXTS: DEFINING THE INTENDED AUDIENCE

Directions: Which of the following influenced your definition of the intended audience for this text? How? Be specific?

GENRE (Is the text a play, novel, poem, story, folktale, etc.?

MODE OF DISCOURSE (Is the purpose of the text to describe, persuade, explain, or tell a story? Does it inform or entertain?)

RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES (Does the author use repetition, irony, juxtaposition, personification, metaphors, etc.?)

LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY (What are the sentences like? What parts of speech predominate? What sounds are common? What is the punctuation like? How does all of this combine to create a rhythm and pace? What connotations do the words create?)

AUTHOR'S VOICE AND READER'S ROLE (From what point of view do you see the text? Who, if anyone, is narrating? How close or far away do you feel from the writer and/or the narrator? How reliable is the writer and/or narrator?)

VIEWPOINT (How are points or events ordered? What "camera angles" do you visualize? Does the author show or tell about the events or points made in the text? How close or far away do you feel from the events/points being made? Is the focus narrow or broad?)

MECHANICS/LAY OUT/TYPE-PRINT/FORM OF PRESENTATION (What, if any, effects result from the manipulation of the medium?)

DEGREE OF INTERPRETATION ALLOWED/INFERENCE REQUIRED (How much is given to you and how much do you have to put into the text?)

DEGREE OF "WILLING SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF" (How much do you have to pretend or imagine? How realistic is the text? Is it more fiction or non-fiction?)

DEGREE OF SERIOUSNESS/FORMALITY (How much attention is required on your part as reader? What is the author's tone toward you and the text?)

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE (What does the author assume you know about--e.g. objects, people, events, life styles, places, etc.? How much does the author help the reader build knowledge about important points in the text?)

VALUES/CHARACTERS/IDEAS/ATTITUDES/ACTIONS (Do you agree or disagree with the author about these? Do you empathize, admire, see similarities to yourself, want to imitate? Or do you feel critical, disgusted, frustrated, left out, wanting to ignore?)

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DEFINITION OF A READER

April, 1984

PART I: Place a mark along the line in the appropriate place.

Age: 2----------100

Historical period: 2000B.C.----------2000A.D.

Sex: Female----------Male

Like:

Abstract ideas----------Concrete details
Serious thinking----------Comedy/laughter
Intimacy/friends----------Distance/my own space
Formality/structure----------Informality/no structure
Thinking/talk----------Action
Upper class people----------Common people

For this reading, I:

Have lots of time----------Am in a hurry
Am willing to think hard----------Feel lazy
Feel critical----------Feel sympathetic

PART II: Think about and jot some notes about each of these points to summarize your current:

Interests (what do you like?):

Life style (what do you do for work and play?):

Concerns (what matters right now, and for the future?):

Values (what is important to you?):

Reading/media habits and experiences (what reading and media experiences do you commonly get involved in?):

Setting while reading (what are your surroundings as you prepare to read this text?):

Goals for reading (what do you hope to get from this reading?):

Prior knowledge (from a quick skim, what important information do you have that will help you read this text--about objects, events, people, vocabulary, places, etc.)